

# Tribes and Democracy in Iraq

## —Are Iraqi Tribes a Steppingstone on the Path to Democracy?

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### Abstract

As of today, democracy in Iraq is still in its early stages of development, with the progress of the regime being judged through a static and idealistic view of what democracy should be, neglecting the minor details that are bending the progress of the democratic system in Iraq to fit the community in which it is developing. Tribes have indeed been pushing and challenging the ideal democratic principles imposed on them; often, they do not realize how much they have changed during this process. This research explores the impacts of the negative choices of tribes in the political realm, decoding the complex interplay between tribes and current democratic regime. The study employed a qualitative method of research, interviewing a total of 30 tribal heads, associates, and extended members. The study reveals that tribes in Iraq play a complex role in the nation's politics, influenced by their historical sacrifices, deep-rooted loyalty, and significant control over certain political regimes. This has led to a strained relationship between tribes and the government. Finally concluding that while tribal actions often deviate from democratic ideals, their active participation in the democratic process ultimately promotes democracy's appeal among their extensive followers.

### Keywords

Democracy, Middle East, Iraq, Tribes

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## 1. Background and Subject

Many Iraqis would agree that the political transition of our country after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime in 2003 was somewhat hectic. They cannot be blamed; the transition led to social and political tragedy, which resulted in agonizing bloodbaths. Among the public, we would find some who hold the opinion that this is the cost of liberty, but others would find that opinion

to be degrading of the value of the Iraqi blood. The role of Iraqi tribes witnessed a great transition with the new regime, followed by an even grander leap after the 2014 ISIS invasion of the Northern provinces of Iraq, which opened the door for debates around the nature of their influence on fragile democratic progress.

Iraq is a vast landscape of diverse identities; this is a fact that has worked as a curse and a blessing for the state. Historically, Iraq has been among the most difficult states to rule as a result of the pluralist nature of its society. While Iraq had some eras of peace, the conflict between the different ethnicities, religions, and sects, unfortunately, remained a persistent issue. Besides religions, sects, and ethnicities, Iraq's politics is especially influenced by the heavy presence of tribes and their extended branches. These tribes make up the largest part of the state's social landscape, which means that their influence on the democratic process is not something that can be taken lightly. Their existence, though integral to social cohesion, has undergone several fluctuations when it comes to political life, being heavily depended on for several years, only to be completely suppressed for the next decade to be more specific. This paper will explore the impact of the political culture of a state on the development of its political system. This leads us to conclude that the tribal power in Iraq has had a certain impact on the democratic transition of the country.

This research hypothesizes that political peace in Iraq is impacted negatively by the presence of tribal communities. The research will employ a wide range of interviews with heads of tribes, associated members, and experts on this matter to gather the data required to complete the research to test the hypothesis.

**The research will also attempt to answer the following inquiries:**

- Are Iraqi tribes supporters of the democratic transition? Why?
- What is the tribal definition of democracy?
- Are Iraqi tribes a hurdle in the path of achieving a stable democratic government in the country? Why?
- What are tribes' opinions regarding "Democracy"?
- How can tribes be a support for the democratic system? How not?
- What challenges and opportunities have emerged from the involvement of tribes in Iraq's political landscape during its transition towards democracy?
- To what extent have tribal dynamics and conflicts affected the establishment and stability of democratic institutions in Iraq?
- What strategies can be proposed to harness the cultural and social capital of tribes to support democratic values and practices in Iraq's diverse society?
- What specific benefits and disadvantages do tribes see to democracy?
- Are the tribes afraid of the impacts of the democratic dynamics on its internal structure?

## 2. Literature Review

The research will largely draw on the conclusions drawn by one of the most prominent sociologists "Ali Al-Wardi" in his book "A Study in the Nature of the Iraqi

Society (1965)”. In the second chapter, he introduces readers to Bedouinism, first by defining it in order to clarify the meaning of civilization, and second, to attempt to understand the nature of Iraqi society, which in 1965 was heavily populated by Bedouin tribal communities that were insular and resistant to civil life. Regarding the second point, he hypothesizes that Bedouin culture revolves around the concept of competition, which compels the Bedouin individual to become the strongest version of himself. In the desert, where no government exists to hold anyone accountable, the weak are left to die alone. The third chapter of the book provides insight into the Bedouin tendency to fight, whether with the government or among themselves. Al Wardi states that Bedouin people are among the world’s most fight-loving people, attributing this tendency to the dry and scarce climate of the desert in which resources are limited and needs are hard to meet. Al Wardi hypothesizes that this tendency can be found in modern societies to a limited extent (Al-Wardi, 1965). Next, Wimmer, in his paper “Democracy and Ethno-religious Conflict in Iraq,” provides an insight into the role of the Iraqi tribes in the politics of the country. However, the paper does not explicitly address the type of impact these tribes have. He argues that the disaffection from the central government and resistance of the Iraqi tribes have a significant role in shaping the politics of their territories. The paper, in general terms, focuses on the historical context of tribes in the affairs of the state (Wimmer, 2003).

To aid this research in making sense of the impact of the presence of tribes in Iraq on the individual and the society as a whole Clark and Winegard provide sources that discuss the nature of tribalism and its impact on ideological thinking and information processing. While this source does not necessarily mention the case of Iraq or its tribes specifically, it still is a useful source for the section when the research will discuss the evolutionary basis of tribalism and its potential effects on information processing in any group. Clark and Winegard State that being an active part of a tribe imposes on individuals the adoption of that tribe’s ideologies and ideals which leads to distortions from objectivity and the encouragement of one’s ingroup views. They claim that this phenomenon becomes problematic when the ideologies of powerful tribes contradict the empirical information (Clark & Winegard, 2020).

In the context of the construction of the Arabian and especially the Iraqi tribes, Alheis claims that tribes and sects are the most influential and binding bonds in Arabian societies, making them an effective political mobilization tool. Not only that, but he also delves into the details of how tribal power in Iraqi societies was used and still is being utilized to fail or support political governments or political parties. Another argument presented in this paper is that democratic stability depends on the adjustments of the economy, politics, and society of any country that wishes to transition. In the case of Iraq, according to Alheis, the heavy presence of tribes in the country resulted in a society that rejected democratic norms. “In other instances, sheiks would monopolize material and political gains at the expense of the tribesmen, engendering forms of exploitation that—in many instances—pushed tribesmen to rebel.” This paper is among the most relevant to

this research being constructed based on discussing various points, some of which are focal in this research's discussion (Alheis, 2011).

Still, in the context of exploring the role of tribes as a hurdle in the path of achieving stable democracy, Ghai et al. shed light on the status associated with the tribal identity in Iraq and how it helped to transform the value of these tribes. Their paper describes the status of tribes under Saddam Hussein's regime. This example was then used to prove that recognizing the authority of tribal sheiks to settle disputes and regulate affairs among their tribesmen and with other tribes, as well as granting them land rights and allowing them to arm their followers was a clear factor in encouraging them to support the regime. Further, that paper states that to efficiently rule Iraq, governments have to pay special attention to "the ethnic dimensions" of the politics in the country. Ghai et al. claim that to achieve this, subsequent Iraqi governments tended to diffuse and share the authority through the decentralization of power to local communities (Ghai et al., 2003). Along the same lines, Yape (2000) in "Tribalism in Iraq, the Old and New" hypothesizes that based on the perceived patterns of tribal behavior and treatment in the old Saddam Hussein regime, it will be necessary for any successor to follow the same path if they were looking for social and political stability. In other words, future Iraqi leaders need to plan ahead for how to get the benefit of the most powerful tribal leaders aligned with their government.

In *Sheikhs and Ideologues*, Faleh A. Jabar argues that tribes have been a tool in the hands of successive governments, used at times as instruments of stabilization and at other times mobilized for war. "*Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq*" is a source that discusses similar issues to the previous paper but remains an essential piece of literature for the process of gathering data. He also argues that tribal power grew stronger during periods of state weakness, emphasizing their role as "safety nets" when the government is falling apart. He further notes that the re-empowerment of the tribes or what he called "Retribalization" along with a strong state control has proved to cause conflicts between state and tribe over authority and loyalty.

Bobseine discusses how influential tribal heads and members can impact the Iraqi political procedures through their ties with party and PMU leaders, recognition by the government, and coordination with the security authorities. She found through interviews that sheiks who maintain close ties with political and PMU leaders even if not publicly acknowledged, tend to have more influence in political affairs. On the other hand, the existence of the "Tribal Affairs Committees" in Parliament and the office of the Iraqi Prime Minister in addition to the Directorate of the Tribal Affairs in the Ministry of Interior makes it evident that the state recognizes the power of tribes in Iraq. Bobseine argues that these designated agencies allow wider space for the tribal sheiks to employ more influence on political decision-making. Bobseine states that so far, the existence of tribes challenges democracy because they undermine the principles of equality, representation, and accountability. Although she could be stating the obvious, the close ties between sheiks and political leaders may lead to favoritism, nepotism, and the concentra-

tion of power in the hands of a few influential tribal figures, potentially sidelining other voices and perpetuating inequality. Moreover, the unlimited authority given to tribes could result in the creation of a parallel legal system that does not adhere to the universal principles of human rights. Despite the previous arguments, she concludes that Iraqi tribes have a positive role as well. For example, she mentions their participation in mitigating social disorder phenomena during times of state indifference. She states that their engagements with various political and non-political actors grant them the ability to influence these actors for their interests (Bobseine, 2021).

Articles in the Arabic language such as that by “Al Melaf”, and “Al-Shammari” argue that political parties and coalitions especially those who ran multiple times before the election mobilize the support of tribes and heads of tribes rather than politically active youth. These articles agree on the fact that tribes with their large population and extended connections provide these corrupt parties with what can be described as “a safe mattress to fall on”. Sometimes political candidates running in rustic areas, where tribes are mostly in control, have no other option but to ask for the blessing of the tribes residing in that area. They also argue this is increasingly causing political instability as the changes in tribes’ political affiliations push the disadvantaged political candidates to revenge. One of the most notable claims that these three articles touch on is that if such practices continue, more civil and academic candidates, who refuse to follow tribal traditions, will fail resulting in a parliament and governorate councils dominated by tribal power. According to Al-Shammari, the majority of election candidates consider the “Diwans” of Sunni and Shia tribes as their “Mecca” before any upcoming elections. The same article also argues that ex-prime minister Noori Al Maliki used gifts of gratitude such as pieces of land, guns, government office jobs, and more for his affiliated tribes (Al-Melaf, 2023; Al-Shammari, 2017).

Another paper of that sort is “Understanding Iraq” by Sabah Al Nasser. While Al Nasser argues that the tribal system has provided a sense of identity and belonging for many Iraqis, contributing to the preservation of cultural traditions and customs, tribes have been involved in power struggles and have sometimes abused their authority. In other words, he does not give a clear-cut view of the nature of tribal impact on Iraqi politics and society, instead, he presents his stand as someone who believes in the complexity and multifaceted role of tribal influence (Al Nasser, 2008).

On a different note, a published data file by the West Asia Research Center is one of the best papers I read about the role of tribes in the politics of Iraq in Arabic, and I consider it to be a foundational stone in building my research. The information in that research is organized into 10 sections each with an array of insights. The sections of most significance for my data-gathering process are sections 4, 5, and 6. In section 4, it is argued, in clear terms, that tribal involvement in modern civil politics has negative consequences, including the distortion of electoral processes and democratic principles. Also, the section contains warnings against

tribes transitioning into partisan entities competing for power, which can undermine communal cohesion, threaten societal security, and lead to fragmentation. What further complicates the political and social life in Iraq is that tribal loyalties and sectarianism pose challenges to building a modern state, citizenship, and national identity. In the later sections, the authors dive into the factors that allowed the space for tribes to participate heavily in the political process and the negative consequences of that. One of the most notable arguments of the paper can be found in section 6, where it is argued that the concept of tribalism is fundamentally a divisive factor rather than a communal one, as it creates communal entities with their own internal loyalties that conflict and compete with others who share the same society and that the construction of tribal authority, traditions, and customs as a parallel to the authority of the law, pushes society towards tribalism. Similar to the claim in Clark and Winegard, the paper argues that tribal fanaticism forces the individual members to stick with the whole in staying in or leaving a deal. Therefore, the intellectual position of an individual who is part of a traditional tribe differs completely from that of the same person if he was a free thinker in modern society (W.A.R.C., n.d.).

Mohammed R. presents what can be considered an update on the arguments presented by Bahaar about the accumulation of weapons in the hands of tribal groups (Shafaaq News, 2020). She argues that the weakening of the central state after 2003 encouraged many tribes to acquire weapons to defend their territories and the increased availability of weapons. She claims that after the toppling of the regime, the importance of joining a tribe spiked as it was the only way to guarantee security and protection (Mohammed, 2021). Ali and Khalaf agree with the aforementioned papers on the issues of the 2003 power vacuum and the militarization of tribes. On these issues, in particular, they do not present any novel ideas. Instead, they join the tens of academics who infer that the political ruin that the U.S. left in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime called for tribes to fill the need for powerful authority and security. The paper, however, draws on how the tribal authority has undermined the principles of democracy and challenged a quick political recovery.

On the other hand, Asfura-Heim argues in his report "No Security without U.S." that tribalism is key to the Iraqi identity, and it provides the Iraqi individual with a sense of unity, belonging, and cohesion with the broader community. His report is another essential paper with thoughtful points, which my research will build on and draw support from. He also argues that tribes are a security agent, as their large numbers and sense of nationalism make them more than ready to be mobilized to defend the stability of the nation against aggression. In his view, tribes are a connecting chain that links the state to the local citizens. Based on that, they can be considered as a bridge to maintain communication and cooperation between the two parts. In areas where the state controls barely hold, tribes act as the law-implementation tool by functioning as a parallel government structure, providing stability and holding people accountable to the law. Tribal heads act as

judges in the areas where people are more attached to customs, he adds, with that, they also act as conflict resolution mechanisms (Asfura-Heim, 2014).

Hussein Ali, through Fanack News, argues that Iraqi society is an excellent tribal ground and that the Iraqi state was established initially by the settlement of tribes. The concept of the state and law is supposed to provide all citizens with what the tribe traditionally provides for its members through the fair application of laws on all members of society. Naturally, the role of the tribe becomes more prominent and influential as state institutions, especially the judiciary, weaken. Therefore, tribalism may be seen as a primitive form that hinders the realization of citizenship. This argument emphasizes that the tribe constitutes a system that protects society when state institutions collapse. The article claims that the vast majority of the Iraqi people are tribal, whether they belong to the Arab component in its Sunni and Shia branches or even to the Kurdish and Turkoman components (Fanack News, 2023).

Without highlighting the name of the author, The Euphrates Center for Strategic and Development Studies recounts the discussions that went around in a seminar held in the province of Karbala in 2018 led by an assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Karbala “Khalid Al Ardawi”. The piece is filled with superfluous information and remarks that only add up to the word count of the article but not its actual academic value. What can be inferred from it is that tribes hold a strong weapon in their grip which is their influence on their members. The paper mentions the several illegal ways that the tribal power was abused and advises against that. Since the paper was written at a time that coincides with the 2018 parliamentary elections, it states that tribes should instead invest their power to influence in encouraging their members to participate in the elections and protect their right to vote. It also urges tribes to fight against and protect their integrity from corrupt political candidates who try to mobilize to win the elections (Haider, 2018).

In “The Role Of Iraqi Tribes After The Islamic State Ascendance” Gartenstein-Ross and Jensen defined “the Awakening movement” or “Al Sahwa” as the tribal uprising against AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) in the Anbar province of Iraq. The Sahwa movement emerged as a response to AQI’s opposition to tribal power and their brutal tactics. They state that the movement involved groups of local fighters called Tribal Revolutionaries, who battled against AQI with the help of Sunni Islamist politicians. Important tribal leaders like Abu Risha and Abu Fahad played big roles in the Sahwa movement. The Sahwa movement started in September 2006 and marked a major change in the fight against AQI. The way they view it is that the movement helped to restore security and stability in the Anbar province of Iraq, as tribal leaders and their affiliated groups actively fought against AQI. The paper will be used as a demonstration of the importance of tribal power and unity in countering extremist ideologies, maintaining local security, and achieving the goals of democracy (Gartenstein-Ross & Jensen, 2015).

Last but certainly not least, Malkasian in his book “The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State” further expands the discussion on the Al Sahwa

movement. He argues that The Awakening movement was successful in suppressing the old enemy and holding in check what remained of AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq) in Ramadi and other areas of Anbar province. The tribal leaders played a dominant role in this movement, and their tribesmen joined the police and worked together on security matters. He proposes the fact that by 2007, AQI's strength had significantly reduced, leading to its eventual retreat from Ramadi, due to multiple reasons. First, most tribal leaders in Ramadi had aligned themselves with the awakening movement, which increased the resistance from both tribal fighters and coalition forces. The Unity of effort by the US-led coalition, the Iraqi military forces, and the tribal men is what led to the demise of the AQIs, and this failure resulted in the alienation of the Sunni tribes (Malkasian, 2017).

Among the previous studies, including those by Karim Nima from *Al Jazeera* (2004), Bobseine (2021), Asfura-Heim (2014), Ali and Khalaf (2022), and Malkasian (2017), interviews were conducted to gauge the sentiments of the Iraqi public. These studies concluded that Iraqi tribes play a dual role in the country's politics. While interviewees acknowledged that tribes have hindered political recovery, they emphasized that tribes should not be viewed solely as negative catalysts, as they have also served as agents of security and justice in times of weakened law enforcement. However, these studies underexplored important aspects such as personal feelings toward tribal identity, female perspectives (from both insiders and experts), and contemporary updates in Iraqi law concerning tribal activities. This research addresses these gaps in nuanced detail, offering a view of the tribal role that departs from democratic idealism towards a more realistic, fluid understanding of the democratic system.

### 3. Research Methodology and Approach

#### 3.1. Research Approach

Based on the comparisons found in Soiferman in his paper "Compare and Contrast Inductive and Deductive Research Approaches" there are two main approaches which are inductive and deductive. The inductive research approach or in other words, the bottom-up approach, starts with the initial observations and basic data and then develops that into hypotheses and theories. It can be described as moving from the specific to the general, where arguments based on experience or observation are best expressed inductively. It involves using observations and data to identify themes and patterns that form the basis for further exploration (Soiferman, 2010). Deductive, or top-to-bottom approach on the other hand, according to Azungah, is "basing analysis on pre-existing theory". In other words, using an organizing framework comprised of themes for the coding process. It involves drawing initial codes from the existing literature on the topic of inquiry and assumes that certain core concepts are in the data based on knowledge of the extant literature on the topic (Azungah, 2018).

This paper will use the inductive approach explicitly to derive insights from the specific context of Iraqi tribes and their interaction with democracy and generate

theories.

### 3.2. Research Design

Qualitative research design involves the use of non-numerical data to explore and understand social phenomena, subjective experiences, and meanings. Qualitative designs often employ in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis to gather data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

This research will use a qualitative research design and data sets will be collected primarily through semi-structured interviews with tribe heads, tribe members, and associates. Interviews can facilitate the extraction of longer and more comprehensive responses. Moreover, conversations between the participants are a rich source of information that can be noted down to improve the conclusions drawn in this research. Along with qualitative analysis of the collected, some figures and numbered data will be added. A copy of the original interview guide will be provided in the Appendix.

### 3.3. Sampling Method

As it is often described, the process of sampling is a process of selecting several individuals from the larger group to study their behaviors or opinions and there are two methods of sampling (Random and non-random). Non-random sampling uses certain criteria and characteristics to choose the participants in the study (Patten, 2016).

Selecting the interview participants will be based on pre-decided criteria (non-random sampling). This is majorly imposed by the nature of the study, again, the research will be conducted on a specific divide of the Iraqi population. The reason for this is simply that in modern times, some individuals and families choose to isolate themselves from the matters of the tribe. The findings will be drawn from interviews with 30 individuals using a prepared set of questions. The idea behind this number is that the focus will be centered on understanding the information provided by the interviewed individuals rather than the number of participants (quality over quantity). The selection of the participants is tailored to encompass a wide spectrum of views on the topic, strategically chosen to ensure diversity and depth while focusing on the factor of thematic saturation. Participants are selected based on their strong tribal affiliation spotted through the rhetorical patterns in their speech. This group is expected to reveal insights about tribal tradition and relations with the government (keeping in mind that their pride will prevent them from revealing certain details). Conversely, the study will target another group that is subdivided into two groups (chosen to isolate themselves from the tribe and born and raised away from tribal influence), both of which are vital for capturing the evolution of tribal identity in modern Iraq. This number is optimal to manage within tight financial limits while still obtaining meaningful, diverse data. Participants willing to engage without financial incentives were preferred to mitigate costs, aligning with the practical needs of the study (Creswell & Creswell,

2017).

### **3.4. Data Collection**

After explaining the nature of the research to the participants, the interviewer will ensure that they realize the voluntary nature of this interview. The interviewer will also explain to the interviewees that their contacts and personal information will never be shared with anyone, and that they may withdraw from this experience if they wish. A form with all these details will be signed at the beginning of the interview. The list of questions will be translated, printed, and handed out to the participants. A copy of the interview questions is provided on page 10 of this document.

The interviews will take place either face-to-face or via phone calls, depending on the participants' availability and location. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The interviews will primarily be conducted in Arabic unless circumstances allow for English to be used.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

The collected data will thematically be analyzed using coding. This involves organizing and categorizing data into themes or patterns that emerge from the data. Themes are patterns that will be repeated throughout the different interviews, they allow researchers to gain insights and understand the underlying meanings within the data. Coding is the process of separating the data into categories and labels to capture the essence of the gathered information (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **3.6. Ethics**

The research will adhere to AUIB's Research Ethics Guidelines. Among the considerations that will be strictly followed throughout the different stages of preparing for this research are participant information confidentiality, informed consent, and avoiding plagiarism.

### **3.7. Limitations**

The research will be limited by the small sample size, which may have an impact on the ability to generalize the findings. Researcher bias could be a potential limit since the samples will be selected non-randomly. In addition, the cross-sectionalism of the study gives insight into the opinions of people in the year 2024, which limits longitudinal insights.

### **3.8. Variables**

This research hypothesizes that tribes cast a negative influence on the functions of the government, causing political unrest and attacking many democratic principles. This makes tribal power an independent variable since its impact on the government is what is being tested in this research. That also leaves us with multiple dependent variables, which are the functions of the government institutions or the performance of law enforcement and public services. Political unrest and

the violation of the fundamentals of democracy are the other dependent variables. The study looks at how the interferences of tribal members and chiefs in the political sphere undermine the system's principles of fair elections, the rule of law, complete candidate transparency, and others causing political life to fall into chaos.

### 3.9. Indicators

- The control of the tribe over their area and their followers around the country.
- Agreements and disagreements with political figures and parties.
- Knowledge of the basic principles of democratic rule.
- Political stability in periods of heavy tribal activity.
- Levels of corruption in periods of heavy tribal activity.
- Levels of clientelism in periods of heavy tribal activity.
- The success of political figures in isolation of tribal support.
- To what extent do tribes feel that their power is checked by the current regime compared to the past regime?

## 4. Research Findings

The data was collected in different phases, starting with older participants who were the first to open their doors for the researcher to converse with them on the role of tribes in Iraq. Five experts, two females and three males, with an age range of 45-59, gave their views on the topic, and that process took three weeks. Beyond that phase, the researcher focused on interviewing people with a deep connection to the tribe who also have held lower titles in the structure within the tribe. Seven people, six men and one woman, happily responded to some of the questions while diverting away from some with clear hesitant tones.

Eighteen students at the American University in Baghdad agreed to respond to the questions making the total number of participants 30 people with ages ranging from 20 to 59. The wide range of age and affiliation with tribes created clear divisions and patterns in the list of responses. Below, I presented each question with one or two of its most prevailing patterns that appeared in the list of responses:

<i>Question</i>	<i>Common Themes</i>	<i>Frequency (n = 30)</i>
What is your definition of the new democratic regime?	<b>A Disappointment compared to how democracy is practiced elsewhere:</b> Participants expressed that Iraq is experiencing some dysfunctionalities with its internal political management system that are hindering its democratic progress.	18
What is the kind of relationship you have with your tribe?	<b>Strong pride and cultural identity:</b> Some participants felt a deep sense of connection and responsibility toward their tribe, often seeing it as a source of honor and legacy.	20
	<b>Disengagement:</b> Other participants were born and raised in isolation from the social and political influence of the tribe.	10
Do you believe that tribal affiliation divides or unites?	<b>Tribal unity as a social stabilizer:</b> Responses commonly mentioned that tribal affiliations help maintain social cohesion.	21
	<b>Privilege and Favoritism:</b> Some felt that tribal identity has a class sense to it, with tribes having more reputation and followers than others making them more powerful.	9

## Continued

What is the political role of tribes after democracy?	<b>Positive Role:</b> Some participants noted that tribes played a significant part in unifying communities and solving conflicts, especially after 2003 and 2014. <b>Negative or No Role:</b> Others noted that tribes have, unwittingly, undermined the principles of democracy. Some participants believe that tribes do not have any political role in the government and their interference in politics is limited to financial gains.	8 21
Impact of tribal traditions on laws and democracy?	<b>Tribal influence on legal outcomes:</b> Many mentioned that tribal customs can affect the justice process, sometimes easing penalties through negotiation. Many noted that traditions should remain traditions, in other words, they could bring serious danger if legalized.	25
Tribal power vs. state weakness	<b>Tribal power increases when the state is weak:</b> Many participants observed that tribes tend to take on protective and governance roles in the absence of strong state authority.	30
What does Iraq need to improve?	<b>Incorporating tribes into formal governance:</b> Participants suggested that acknowledging the role of tribes in governance could help address local problems more effectively.	9
Dislikes about democracy	<b>Poor implementation of democratic principles:</b> Most respondents were frustrated with how democracy was applied, highlighting a gap between ideals and reality. Many emphasized the false implementation of the freedom of speech and freedom of peaceful protest.	28

## Narrative

The first question participants preferred to respond to was their definition of democracy. While none of the participants successfully defined a democratic system, many emphasized freedom of speech as a key principle. A common theme that emerged was that around 60% of the people interviewed felt that democracy in Iraq was still in its infancy and had not yet reached its full potential. They were generally disappointed, however, with how things are currently being run. As one participant said, *“It is still a newborn and requires a lot of time and effort to get to a more stable position.”*

Around 33% of participants hesitated to respond to the question about their relationship with their tribe. This hesitation later revealed itself as a sign of weak ties to the tribe. When asked about the reasons for such weak ties, a common response was that they had never needed to explore their traditional tribal background. Interestingly, interviewees with this opinion were primarily young students who responded online, with ages not exceeding their early 20s. Approximately 67% of the participants, many of whom had already launched their careers or were part of the tribal structure, affirmed that their tribe symbolized pride and protection. They spoke with deep gratitude about the role of the tribe in solving problems or helping one of their relatives out of trouble, including securing a job. Unsurprisingly, the ages of these participants ranged from 40 to 59. To further clarify this position, one participant stated, *“It is an honorary relationship, a pride relationship. Having my first name close to my tribe’s name imposes certain requirements on me, one of which is living up to the reputation of that tribe.”*

When asked about whether tribes are divisive tools, 21 interviewees, or 70% of the participants, initially rejected this idea, only to confirm it a few minutes into the conversation, without any pressure from the interviewer. A former Iraqi government minister stated, *“My tribe helped me a lot to get into the political sphere. This is a positive thing, and it does not mean a violation of the principles of de-*

*mocracy.*” This response clearly reflects an understanding that is molded by a different adaptation, one that does not require fair competition in elections. The other 30% of participants openly acknowledged that tribalism in Iraq diverts the country from adhering to the law, instead fostering favoritism and partiality. One participant stated, “*In our Iraqi society, there is such a thing as privilege based on one’s tribal affiliation—unfortunately, the complete opposite of the West, where everyone is equally treated by the government and its employees.*”

Among the 30 participants, eight fully affirmed that the political role of tribes had been positive and even predicted that tribes would continue to act as “diplomatic protectors” of their members. Five participants, or 16%, suggested that tribes had periods of significance when their power was used to recover lost regions of Iraq between 2014 and 2016 and to create security and stability between 2003 and 2006. They added that beyond these two periods, tribes had no notable activity related to the government and were generally treated like any average citizen regarding political participation. As one participant said, “*And if you ever thought there were seats in parliament or the ministry that are dedicated to tribal heads, there is nothing like that.*” In the same context, 53% of the interviewees held the firm opinion that tribal sheiks traditionally view the government as their enemy and, unless they see potential gains from proximity to candidates or parties, they prefer to remain where they can wield the most influence “Majles.” As one participant noted, “*Until today, they are still in politics, in a way, by providing mobilization tools...*”

Regarding the impact of tribes on state laws and the implementation of democratic principles, 83% of participants directly attested or the researcher inferred from their convoluted responses that traditions have historically influenced the implementation of laws in regions with heavy tribal control. Almost all participants mentioned the tradition of the “tribal warning raid,” where someone’s property is shot at or around as a form of warning and grievance before escalating to further action. Iraqi tribes rely on this method as a form of conflict resolution for financial, honor, or property conflicts, among others. Participants proudly mentioned that Iraqi law has now criminalized this tradition, categorizing it as an act of terrorism, which is prosecuted under Article 2 of Law No. 13 of 2005.

Discussions about the impacts of “Fasil,” which resolves conflicts through financial or moral compensations, showed the two sides of this custom. Participants pointed out that, as a result of this tradition, many criminals walk free today because their families paid the “diya” (financial compensation). Many young female participants and male participants with legal experience expressed concerns that such settlements, especially in cases of domestic abuse, will lead to an increase in domestic crimes. One participant stated, “*Laws influenced by traditions strengthen the grip of toxic patriarchy, resulting in further violations of women’s rights and freedoms.*”

A majority of participants agreed that weak state institutions and law enforcement allow larger tribal domination. Many cited the power vacuums of 2003 and 2014 as examples of tribal dominance, which also led to positive outcomes. Ap-

proximately 30% of respondents believed that Iraq should integrate tribal traditions into the political system, including allocating parliamentary seats for tribal leaders. In contrast, around 70% felt that tribes should limit their influence on social matters and stay out of politics. Some justified this by explaining that democracy is foreign to tribes, which have never practiced its principles as tribal leadership is inherited, and disputes over leadership often lead to the formation of new subgroups. Others argued that both tribes and Iraqis are still adjusting to the shock of regime change after decades of oppression and that their lack of experience with democracy has led to the mismanagement of the new system.

Finally, many participants were eager to point out the faults in Iraq's democratic practices, especially highlighting political and social repression of freedom of expression and speech. While Iraq has moved beyond the extreme restrictions on freedoms experienced under the previous authoritarian regime, new restrictions and redlines have emerged, threatening the freedoms of peaceful citizens. Some respondents, who wished to remain anonymous, revealed that parliamentary seats have been bought and sold since the establishment of the "democratic" regime and that certain politicians, who once worked in the cafeterias of government offices, were given political titles and ministries based on their loyalty to particular groups, which brought financial gains to those groups. One participant stated, "*If you have a certain amount of money—call it \$1,000,000—you can buy a position, and you don't need to be from a tribal or ethnic background.*" Others were more reserved, suggesting that Iraq should focus on building its democratic institutions instead of catering to the demands of different factions.

## 5. Tribes and Tribalism

Drawing from the previous works of the prominent Iraqi sociologist Ali Al Wardi, Tribes as a social phenomenon is known as a social organization that is built on the foundation of kinship/ blood ties and loyalty. While it is true that not all tribes are Bedouins (nomads) and not all nomadic groups necessarily extend from a single bloodline or a tribe, we can say that the majority of Western and Southern Iraqi tribes are descendants of nomadic Arab groups that migrated to Iraq from proximate deserts. Examples are the tribes of Shimmar, Anza, etc. With that in mind, I must refer to the fact that Ali Al Wardi theorized that tribes were the central organizing entity that provided security and community for the nomadic group against the harsh circumstances of the desert and that tribes established honor codes and a justice system for its people. These principles were set in stone and are still influencing the decisions and actions of modern-day tribe enthusiasts (Al-Wardi, 1965: p. 39). As for the father of sociology, Ibn Khaldun, he points to Assabiyah as the cornerstone of the establishment of a tribe with all the strength, unity, and solidarity that this concept entails. This strong binding loyalty serves, according to him, both as an establishing and destroying power of states. For as binding as tribal loyalty can be, some common principles among tribes, such as those of raiding and plundering, work against the establishment of a unified and

secure society of people (Al-Wardi, 1965: pp. 22-56).

In 2023, tribe members constituted roughly 75% of the Iraqi population, well integrated into modern Iraqi society, and it all started in the 1920s under the monarchical regime. European (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2023: p. 17) Members of the new sedentary tribe hold jobs in various sectors of the job market, including leadership positions, many are integrated into government titles and official offices, in the military and the police. Due largely to government policies, nomadism went back to being completely strange to the country, with the cultural aspect of tribalism still in effect in the society, especially in remote, closed villages and small towns. The power of tribal leadership prevails over the power of the state in some areas of Southern and Western Iraq in terms of conflict resolution and endorsing candidates for provincial council elections, and it's all for more power or more financial gains.

The traditions of raiding and plundering are worth noting since their roots extend to impact the political and social choices of many tribe leaders. Traditionally, nomadic tribes engaged in periodic raids of neighboring communities, looting their resources, and this was considered a gauge of the prestige and honor of tribesmen, which makes it a socially accepted practice (Al-Wardi, 1965: p. 26).

Many Iraqis might be sleeping on the fact that tribalism has significantly divided Iraqi individuals by forcing them to adopt a certain traditional (imagined) identity. While this identity gives individuals a sense of belonging and security, the existence of around 150 clan clusters around the country also means 2000 different praised tribal identities impacting national unity (Mohammed, 2021: p. 770; Al Nasseri, 2008). The adoption of tribal identity over national identity has grave implications for strong state-building, for a stable state requires its citizens to pour their loyalty into the cup of state laws and institutions. Naturally, keen tribal members underestimate the values of a democratic state, which entails individuals being bound by and respectful of the rule of law, equality, and individual freedoms. Tribal affiliation distorts the process of forming individualistic thoughts and beliefs, leading those who follow tribal leadership to naturally adopt or reject values based on the set of their tribal codes (Clark & Winegard, 2020: p. 6; W.A.R.C., n.d.).

Following the toppling of the previous regime in 2003, the power vacuum left in the state allowed tribes to ascend to power, consequently bringing back the value of joining tribal institutions. The absence of a powerful securitizing authority opened the space for many of these tribes to militarize their members, something that turned the eyes towards tribes instead of law enforcement for security, thus further fragmenting the power structure during that period (Jabar, 2000: p. 30). The tribe had a non-negotiable influence on the vast majority of its members, enabling it to enforce tribal codes that preserve social order and protect members. For example, mechanisms like "Fasils" (tribal reconciliations) have been pivotal in resolving conflicts and maintaining security internally when state mechanisms falter. Consequently, not only did that turn the tribe into one of the most powerful

patronage tools (will be explained below), but it also demoted the possibility of establishing a cohesive society of nationally committed, free people (Mohammed, 2021: pp. 776-778). Finally, borrowing Al Wardi's sociological logic in that context, "The government or state does not emerge except in civilization. It is rare to find a state that originates in Bedouin or primitive life." (Al-Wardi, 1965: p. 55).

With that much power in their hands, tribal leaders turned to power traffickers who—along with the millions of their followers in cities and villages—were mobilized for or against a certain cause. The truth is that the power they hold has been abused to collect financial gains at the expense of integrity and transparency, and while their power was utilized for various purposes that aren't necessarily related to the discussion of this research, political purposes have been on the rise since early 2005 until today (Al-Shammari, 2017; Al-Melaf, 2023). That is not to say that the previous regimes are innocent of these allegations, absolutely not, instances of mutual exchange of benefits between tribes and the state date back to the Ottoman regime in Iraq. Evidence states that the monarchy, as well as Saddam Hussein's regime, used tribes as a support basis in periods of political and economic instability in exchange for lands and weapons (Alheis, 2011: p. 28; Jabar, 2000: p. 30). It is obvious, as the pattern shows today, that this has been a temporary last resort that shaken regimes escaped to after years of sidelining the same tribes.

As for today, deals are conducted in the light of the day, and the act of endorsing a certain candidate or a party has—somehow—pushed itself to be among the accepted norms of fair competition. As one of the interviewees stated—he was an elected official in the previous Al Kadhimi government—"a tribe supporting its son in the election is freedom, there is no shame in that." Ideally, candidates, whether in the PM or parliamentary elections, should be selected based on merit, technical skills, and experience to ensure corruption and nepotism-free governance. But that has not been the situation, the majority of parliament seats, if not sold, then are distributed to those candidates who have the richest history of benefitting their people with contracts and other favors. You can imagine the tribes that participate in political mobilization as a horn that can be used to attract attention or send warnings because if they are not grouped to help mobilize votes for a certain candidate, they are usually directed to tarnish the reputation of rivals. The lived Iraqi reality appears to violate several key democratic tenets as these practices lead to the marginalization of candidates who depend on their excellence and experience in running for elections and others who do not belong to a powerful tribe that has their back (Al-Melaf, 2023). This is clearly an attack on the principles of fair competition, meritocracy, pluralism, and transparency, reforming such violations should be prioritized (Haider, 2018). Iraqi politics needs a fair competitive environment in which candidates strive to enhance their education, present their best plans for the benefit of the national interest, and increase their efficiency. Logically, this is the core objective of democracy: to select the most capable individuals as leaders of the state and provide elections to serve as a mech-

anism for the public to hold leaders accountable when their service no longer meets expectations (Perreault, 2023).

Tribalism, by its very nature, stands in direct opposition to democratic governance, as tribes tend to reject democratic principles due to their traditional social structures, which are built on hierarchy and loyalty rather than equality and representation (Ali & Khalaf, 2022: p. 263). (The word “nature” of the tribe has been mentioned multiple times in this research; perhaps it’s the wrong term to describe what the researcher is really referring to. In Arabic, the word “nature” as used in relation to the tribe, has the capacity to mean the tribal practices that are common among a wide range of tribes in Iraq and have been practiced for centuries until they became something of nature, preserved in successive generations.) The tribal hierarchy, which depends on the respect of elders regardless of their social or political standing, leaves no room for a free flow of freedoms. This also means that tribal members with leadership and reformist aspirations have no opportunity to ascend to positions of power unless, of course, they have connections. The issue here is that Iraqi tribes had no practical experience with any of the democratic principles, which, for sure, justifies their resistance against efforts to impose principles such as the rule of law, political accountability, equality, etc., unfortunately, the discussed issues are still persistent until today (Dawod, 2015: p. 2; Ali & Khalaf, 2022: pp. 264-265).

A deeper understanding of why tribes have historically clashed with successive non-Iraqi governments, such as the Turks, as well as with Iraqi governments is essential here. In that sense, their rebellions were not generated by their longing for freedom from oppression or liberalization from external/foreign governance, a large part of their rebellions were generated by harmed economic interests. Whenever there were attempts to reallocate resources or enforce taxes, tribes rose and mobilized their popularity against the government. As for freedom, equality, and inclusion, these were alien concepts for the tribe in the period before 2003 (Al-Wardi, 1965: p. 172).

Moreover, the ongoing tribal disassociation from the central government, despite the government’s efforts to engage tribal groups and foster inclusion, has become a significant issue, particularly following the sudden weakening of the state and its institutions in 2003 and 2014. That does not mean that the state’s efforts were necessarily efficient and based on a proven plan to reintegrate tribes into the state apparatus. For example, in 2006, Iraq’s first “elected” government was established, led by Nuri Al Maliki, who, with his lack of political shrewdness, established the “Tribal Council” (Majlis Al-Isnad) two years later. In theory, this council was intended to incorporate tribes into the government, leveraging their ability to communicate the people’s needs to the government and vice versa, while also using them to stabilize society by resolving tribal disputes. In practice, however, the council’s members were random individuals, loyal specifically to Al-Maliki, who were appointed to act as Sheikhs or tribal leaders, resulting in widespread tribal resentment and further alienation from the central government. Many

Sunni tribes were already filled with resentment toward the government, which was dominated by Shia figures (Reda, 2019: pp. 290-292).

For context, the government during the period of 2006-2018 fell into complete dysfunction and systematic corruption; tribes, on the other hand, since 2008, had already isolated themselves from the system in attempts to preserve their identity and autonomy. This resulted in the creation of parallel decentralized authorities that took the role of the government in their communities, providing security and justice (Ali & Khalaf, 2022: p. 256; Bobseine, 2021). If we were to seek justification for this recurring pattern of tribal rejection of state authority, I would refer to what one of the interviewees stated when he said: “There is that tribal feeling of honor and that the country or the government owes them respect, gifts, and love because they sacrificed the blood of their men to free these lands.” In this statement, he is referring to “the Sunni tribal Mobilization Forces” or “Al Hashid Al Ashairi”, which consists of tribes of majorly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Mousil, and Salahuddin. Tribal frustration grew restive as the war against the IS ended, and the response of the government to their sacrifices was superficial and self-serving instead of a genuine invitation for shared governance and partnership. This dynamic has deepened the divide between the government and tribal communities, and even among the tribes themselves, allowing them to strengthen their control over local areas and limit the reach of state law enforcement. As a result, tribal law became the dominant system in these regions, with tribal leaders often assuming the role of courts in resolving disputes, further entrenching their authority (Badawi, 2022).

Although Iraqi tribes may have financial interests and lack strong democratic enthusiasm, their role has been crucial in preserving national unity and offering their members social and political protection. Many regions in Iraq rely entirely on their tribes for security and justice, as tribal systems are more responsive and culturally appropriate. The long weeks and months that the court takes to rule in a certain case are replaced by one session of what’s called “Fasal” (Asfura-Heim, 2014: pp. 11-14; Fanack News, 2023). Additionally, the availability of arms among tribal members has strengthened their influence within their communities. Combined with the strong personal connections between tribe members and their leaders, this gives tribes a comparative advantage over institutions like the police (Shafaaq News, 2020). This also pours into my next point, which is that despite the sub-identities that they force on their members, tribes in Iraq have profound nationalistic feelings toward the country. Tribes have traditionally maintained a strong bond with their land, which has driven them to defend its (their land’s) unity against aggressors on several occasions over the past decade. A notable example is the Sahwa (Awakening) movement from 2006 to 2008, initiated by tribal leaders in Anbar to defend the province—Iraq’s largest—and, by extension, the entire country from Al-Qaeda’s encroachment (Gartenstein-Ross & Jensen, 2015: p. 105). The movement was a symbol of resistance and nationalism, and these tribal fighters were empowered mostly by their unity, “Esprit de Corps” and deep

connection to their land and their people (Malkasian, 2017: p. 201). Although the majority of these tribes and their members either fell victim to the violence of ISIS in 2014 or were hesitant to fight due to fears of state betrayal, some tribes resisted, fighting for months despite government neglect. The Albu Nimr massacre was a notable shock to the Iraqi public in 2014 when around 600 members of the tribe were either executed or disappeared by ISIS fighters. The actions of the Albu Nimr tribe, along with other tribes that did not receive significant attention, demonstrate that tribes are willing to defend their land, even without government recognition of their efforts and sacrifices (Gorin, 2014).

With their positive contributions in mind, doubt still finds its way through the mind of someone who is looking for the full truth. Handing this amount of influence in the hands of democratically illiterate groups will eventually backfire, which is what has been happening since 2008. Tribes who fought in their regions took complete control of these areas, naturally, the people either accepted them (granting them legitimacy) due to their blood ties or the significant favor they provided by liberating the land and protecting property. This has resulted in a phenomenon of unquestioning loyalty to the tribe, which has enabled political figures to exploit tribal influence for their own political gains. Consequently, an easily manipulated public undermines the significance of public opinion, reducing it to nothing more than a reflection of tribal favor rather than genuine independent thought. One must also mention that the era of tribal control, though largely empowered by a weakened government—without placing blame—was a temporary solution, and tribal authority is better than no authority. The natural thing that tribes should do now is to step aside when the government seeks to assert its power in areas that genuinely require an official presence. Only that is just too idealistic since tribes are clashing and bargaining with the government instead, leading to further complicating the process of law implementation (Bobseine, 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

1) Tribalism and its structure inherently contradict democratic governance, which suggests two important points: first, no democratic government has been or should be established on tribal foundations; and second, it is time for the government to limit the tribal role in Iraq to a ceremonial one that preserves traditions and heritage, while eliminating their political and social influence.

2) Having a structure that contradicts the idealistic view of democracy does not necessarily mean that tribes have driven the country toward imminent political ruin. Tribes—while fighting the rule of law and fair elections—are contributing to spreading democratic participation among their followers. By campaigning for a single candidate or a party, tribes are supporting and encouraging their followers to participate in elections.

3) The mention of the financial interests of tribes occurred throughout the paper. However, tribes are slowly learning that the path toward meeting their de-

sires, whether that be lands, money, or autonomy, is through involvement in a certain system. In other words, they learned through the slow progress of our democracy that raids, looting, and internal feuds are not the path toward gains and political attention.

4) In today's Iraq, the gap between the state and tribal leaders remains wide. The state has shifted its focus toward the role of militias and religious leaders in politics, therefore tabling the case of tribal affairs until further notice.

Finally, I will leave you, dear reader—with this campaign banner of a candidate for the local council elections in Baghdad, Iraq April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2024, which says that the tribe of “Albu Faraj” endorses the candidate (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Campaign Banner, April 19, 2024. Source: Author's own creation.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions:

- 1) What is your definition of the new democratic regime?  
ما هو تعريفك لنظام الحكم الحال؟
- 2) What is the thing that you hate the most about our current system?  
ما هو أكثر شيء تكرهه في نظام الحكم الحالي؟
- 3) After 2003, What is the kind of relationship you have with your tribe?  
ما نوع علاقتك بالعشيرة في الوقت الحالي؟
- 4) What do you think about the impact of tribal traditions on state laws and democratic principles?  
ما هو تأثير العرف العشائري على قوانين الدولة وتطبيق مبادئ الديمقراطية؟
- 5) To what extent do you agree or disagree?
  - a) The weaker the government, the stronger the tribe.  
العشيرة تقوى بضعف الدولة. الى أي مدى تتفق مع هذه العبارة؟
- 6) What do you think of the political role of tribes in Iraq after the transition toward democracy?  
ما هو دور العشائر في العراق بعد تغيير نظام الحكم نحو النظام الديمقراطي؟
- 7) Do you think tribalism divides or unites the Iraqi nation?  
هل العشائرية تجمع أو تفرق الشعب العراقي؟
- 8) What do you think Iraq needs to improve its current status?  
ماذا برأيك يحتاج العراق اليوم للنهوض لأفضل حال؟